

# Improving Adolescents' Advertising Literacy Through Education: The Perceptions of Secondary Education Teachers

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, minors are often confronted with new advertising forms such as social media advertising. Compared to rather traditional formats, young consumers experience more difficulties to recognize these new advertising formats because of their integrated and interactive character. Scholars have repeatedly stressed the importance of advertising literacy education in which minors learn how to deal critically with advertisements. A number of advertising literacy programmes have already been developed during the past decades. However, research about teachers' perceptions of advertising literacy education is limited. Therefore, the objective of this research is to uncover secondary education teachers' perceptions of one existing educational package, namely "Advertising in new media". In contrast to other existing programmes, it focuses on new advertising formats. Data for this study were collected not only qualitatively by organizing two focus groups, but also quantitatively by sending a survey to teachers who have downloaded the educational material. The results show that teachers emphasize the importance of minors' ability to deal critically with and to recognize advertising. Regarding the content, advertising literacy education is - according to teachers - expected to pay attention to both traditional and new advertising formats, the intent of advertisers, the used persuasive tactics, the influence of advertising, and the values and norms in advertising. More particularly, it has to be noted that elaborating on Facebook advertising is seen as important in an educational package for adolescents. Furthermore, based on previous studies of Meeus et al (2014) and Nation et al (2003), teachers give their opinion about a number of design guidelines concerning advertising literacy education (e.g. involving parents and the use of authentic advertisements). Finally, with regard to professional development, teachers indicate that advertising literacy is rarely discussed in teacher training. Consequently, teachers suggest the integration of this topic in preservice teacher training. Considering the suggestions given by teachers, further research should focus on both the adaptation or development of (existing) educational material aimed to enhance minors' advertising literacy and its empirical evaluation.

**Keywords:** Advertising literacy education, secondary education, teachers' perceptions

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## 1. Introduction

Previous studies on (the effects of) advertising aimed at minors mainly focused on traditional advertising forms (e.g. television advertisements). As a result of growing up in a society surrounded by an evolving digital media culture, adolescents are often confronted with new advertising forms. Contrary to rather traditional ones, characteristics of new advertising formats make it more difficult for young consumers to detect commercial messages (Hudders et al, 2015). For example, adolescents are fervent users of social networking sites (SNS) as Facebook in which personal information is increasingly used to make advertisements more relevant to individual users (O'Donnell & Cramer 2015). Although Walrave et al (2013) uncovered that a high degree of personalization positively influenced advertising effectiveness, the increasing personalization of SNS advertising is not perceived as privacy invasive by adolescents. O'Donnell and Cramer (2015), nevertheless, remark that social media users are not always aware of personalization, nor do they always understand how it works. Therefore, minors need to acquire advertising literacy, which can be defined as the ability to deal critically with advertisements (Meeus et al, 2014). To enhance minors' advertising literacy, the role of education has been repeatedly stressed (e.g. Rozendaal et al, 2011).

During the past decades, a few advertising literacy programmes have already been developed (Meeus et al, 2014; Rozendaal et al, 2011). To date, these programmes especially concentrate on traditional advertising formats (Meeus et al, 2014). An exception to the rule is the educational package "*Advertising in new media*". The aim of this study is to gain insight into teachers' perceptions about both advertising literacy education in general, to which little attention has been paid in previous research, and the educational package "*Advertising in new media*" more particularly. The following research questions are put forward:

RQ1: Which aspects of advertising literacy are necessary to highlight in education?

RQ2: Which design guidelines are considered to be important by teachers?

RQ3: Do teachers experience a need for professionalization in the context of advertising literacy education?

To answer these research questions, a survey as well as focus groups were set up. In what follows, two previous studies are described in detail because they form the base for both the survey and the focus groups. In addition, below is more information given about the selected educational program.

### **1.1 Previous studies: theoretical frameworks**

Meeus and colleagues (2014) analysed five free online educational resources aimed to improve minors' advertising literacy (e.g. *Admongo* - United States and *MediaRakkers* - The Netherlands). These resources were examined by means of a four-part checklist. The first part concerns the context of the initiative (e.g. the target group and funding sources), whereas the second section of the checklist focuses on the didactic support for the teachers provided by several initiatives. A few examples of items belonging to the second part are the amount of background information and didactic suggestions for teachers, the use of authentic advertisements, a link to curriculum standards, and the possibility to adapt existing educational material. Subsequently, the third part considers which types of advertising formats and strategies are discussed in the several educational packages. In the last section of the checklist, the focus is on the extent to which four aspects of advertising literacy were tackled in the educational programmes, namely recognizing advertising formats, understanding selling intent, understanding persuasive intent, and understanding persuasive techniques. During their theoretical evaluation of educational programmes, Meeus et al (2014) uncovered, among other things, that most of the analysed teaching materials (1) provide didactic support for teachers; (2) are aimed to children in primary school; (3) concentrate on traditional forms of advertising because they have not been updated since their creation, and (4) actively engage the parents.

More generally, Nation and colleagues (2003) consulted studies in four different prevention topics (risky sexual behaviour, substance abuse, school failure, and juvenile delinquency and violence). By using a review-of-reviews approach, they identified nine principles of effective prevention programmes divided over three categories:

#### **1. Principles related to program characteristics**

First, an effective prevention program needs to be *comprehensive*, which refers to the importance of both conducting several interventions to address the problematic behaviour and involving multiple settings (e.g. family, peers and schools) that have an impact on the development of the problem behaviour. A second facet is the use of *varied teaching methods*, or the need for an active, skills-based component in prevention programs. Further, an effective prevention program needs to be *sufficiently dosed*. A synonym for dosage is program intensity. Important aspects are the number of sessions, the session length and the length of the total program. Fourthly, a *theory driven* program is seen as important. Nation et al (2003, p. 452) define it as "programs have a theoretical justification, are based on accurate information, and are supported by empirical research". Encouraging *positive relationships* is another characteristic, which means that peer influences and the impact of significant others need to be considered.

#### **2. Principles related to matching the program with the target population**

Interventions should occur in a child's life on a moment when it will have maximal impact. Developers of a prevention program have to take into account developmental needs (e.g. Piaget's cognitive developmental theory) of participants. Nation and colleagues (2003) name this principle as *appropriately timed*. Next, *socio-culturally relevance* is another characteristic. A prevention program needs to be tailored to local community norms as well as cultural beliefs and practices.

#### **3. Principles related to implementation and evaluation of prevention programs**

An eighth feature of effective prevention programs is *outcome evaluation*. Program evaluation can be interpreted as determining the effectiveness of the intervention. Finally, the implementation of a prevention program is facilitated by *well-trained staff*. Teachers must be sensitive and competent regarding the topic. If necessary, training, support and supervision can be provided.

### **1.2 Advertising in new media**

The educational package "*Advertising in new media*" is developed by *Mediawijs.be* (i.e. the Flemish Knowledge Centre for Media Literacy). Its name suggests that this educational package focuses on several new advertising formats, such as advertisements on Facebook, YouTube and mobile media. The target group of this recently developed program (2014) is grade 7 and 8 of K12 education (12-14 years). Figure 1 illustrates that the teaching material contains a workbook for students (1), a teacher's manual (2), and PowerPoint presentations (3). First, the students' workbook mainly consists of exercises. An examples is "*Surf to Facebook and sign in*."

Examine the first two Facebook advertisements you see. Fill in the table for these advertisements (e.g. What is the content of the advertisement? and Do you like this advertisement, or not?) (p. 6). Next, the teacher's manual includes lesson plans in which different teaching methods (e.g. class discussions) and exercises (see students' workbook) are used to tackle the subject matter. Via the manual, background information is also given to the teachers. PowerPoint presentations, finally, are separately made for each chapter. Figure 1 comprises a fragment of the PowerPoint presentation about advertisements on Facebook.



Figure 1: Advertising literacy in new media

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Survey

In order to measure teachers' perceptions of the educational package "*Advertising in new media*", we developed a survey based on the theoretical frameworks of Meeus et al (2014) and Nation et al (2003) (see Introduction). The survey existed of five parts. The first section included questions to acquire teachers' background information. In the second part of the survey, teachers were asked to describe advertising literacy in their own words and to indicate whether they already used "*Advertising in new media*". If teachers previously implemented it, additional information – such as which chapters were exactly tackled during the lessons – was asked. By means of 48 items (for some examples, see Table 1), teachers' perceptions of both advertising literacy education in general and the selected educational package in particular were uncovered in the third part of the survey. The items can be split up into two subscales, namely content (7) and didactical (41) related items. Remarkable, all teachers – not only those who implemented the teaching material before the survey – were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statements. Although responses were on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), teachers can also choose the option "*I don't know*". The fourth section of the survey is about the preparation of teachers to enhance minors' advertising literacy (e.g. pre- and in-service training). Finally, the last part was solely directed at users of "*Advertising in new media*" because it included items about students' experiences and eventually used assessment methods.

Before "*Advertising in new media*" can be downloaded on the website of *Mediawijs.be*, people have to register themselves. In this way, it was possible to send a survey to people who downloaded the educational material during the school year 2014-2015 ( $n = 247$ ). Although a reminder was sent three times, 28 teachers completed the survey. The sample comprised 5 males and 23 females, with a mean age of 40 years ( $SD = 12.92$ ). Only 10 teachers, who incidentally give other courses, already implemented "*Advertising in new media*" in their classroom practice. Despite the small sample size, we mainly used descriptive statistics to analyse the survey data.

### 2.2 Focus groups

In the qualitative phase of this study, focus groups were set up to discuss – in more detail – some aspects of the survey. Spread over two focus groups, 17 teachers (6 females and 11 males; mean age = 38,94 years,  $SD = 6.83$ ) participated. The recruitment of the participants was done during an event about media literacy organised by *Mediawijs.be*.

Before the start of the focus group, teachers individually answered some general questions, such as their age and the courses they give. Because of audiotaping, informed consent was also obtained. For the guidance of both focus groups, a semi-structured interview was composed (see Appendix) based on the guidelines of Morgan and Krueger (1998). In brief, three major parts were discussed during the focus groups. To start with, a few questions were asked about advertising literacy (education) in general. Afterwards, teachers were given time to browse "*Advertising in new media*" with the aim to write down positive and negative characteristics of the educational package and suggestions on green, orange and blue cards, respectively. These elements were also verbally explained in order that a discussion between the participants started. Aside, none of the 17 participants had previously used the educational package. The focus groups were finished with advice of teachers regarding professional development about advertising literacy education. The focus groups took between 60 and 75 minutes.

### **3. Results**

The results of this study are presented following the three research questions. In each case, both quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus groups) data are used.

RQ1: Which aspects of advertising literacy are necessary to highlight in education?

Both in the survey and the focus groups, the participants were asked to clarify which aspects of advertising literacy are necessary to highlight in education. The abilities to recognise (new) advertising forms and critically deal with advertisements are generally seen as most important. In the survey, teachers stress the significance of tackling traditional advertising forms ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 4.04$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), new (online) advertising forms ( $n = 25$ ,  $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ), the selling and persuasive intent of advertisers ( $n = 25$ ,  $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ), persuasive tactics used by advertisers ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), the influence of advertising on emotions and behaviour ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ), values and norms in advertising ( $n = 26$ ,  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) and less of the legal framework for advertising ( $n = 25$ ,  $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). Regarding the content, participants of the focus groups remark the unilateral focus on new advertising forms and suggest giving also attention to traditional advertising forms (e.g. television). Notwithstanding, a few teachers assume that the teaching material will be too extensive by adding traditional advertising forms.

In addition, teachers who already implemented "*Advertising in new media*" ( $n = 10$ ) were asked to indicate which sections of the educational package they particularly addressed. With the exception of two teachers, they all appealed to the section "Advertising on Facebook" because of, inter alia, the fervent use of this medium by adolescents. Other chapters of the educational material, such as advertising on YouTube, in online brand communities and on mobile media are less popular. The most common reason given by teachers is time pressure. However, teaching about Facebook advertisements is reported as an issue in the focus groups. If students are expected to visit the Facebook website, it must be considered that a number of schools block this social network site and that some students do not have a Facebook account. More specifically, participants of the focus groups argue that minors have to gain insight into the origins of personalized advertisements and the influence of their peers on buying products or preferring some brands. Consequently, all participants of the focus groups ( $n = 17$ ) agree with the statement "*It is an educational task to enhance minors' advertising literacy*". However, it is also emphasized that not only education, but also parents (see also Table 1) and youth movements are responsible for this purpose.

RQ2: Which design guidelines are considered as important by teachers?

The second research question focuses on important design guidelines – based on the research of Meeus et al (2014) and Nation et al (2003) – in the context of advertising literacy education. As mentioned in the methodology section, 28 teachers finished the survey. Since the option "*I don't know*" was added, the number of teachers in Table 1 differ per statement.

**Table 1:** Important design guidelines regarding advertising education literacy

Important design guidelines	N	M (SD)
The educational package fits in with the pupils' environment.	19	3.47 (0.84)
The educational package fits into the lessons I give.	20	3.80 (1.06)
The educational package pays enough attention to:		
- Individual reflection	10	3.80 (0.79)
- Collaborative learning	10	3.90 (0.88)
- Class discussions	11	4.09 (0.83)
I adapt some exercises of the educational material.	11	3.90 (0.70)
I don't like teaching material in PDF-format.	14	3.07 (1.44)
The educational package is time-consuming.	10	3.20 (0.63)
During the entire school career, it is necessary to pay attention to minors' advertising literacy (only grade 7-8).	24	4.17 (0.76)
The appropriate time to have attention for teenagers' advertising literacy is grade 7 and 8.	18	3.88 (1.08)
In the educational package, it is clearly indicated which curriculum standards can be reached.	16	4.00 (0.73)
By means of this educational package, it is possible to reach cross-curricular objectives.	20	3.80 (0.78)
By means of this educational package, it is possible to reach subject-related curriculum standards.	17	3.82 (0.73)
The educational package would be better if it was not cross-curricular.	11	1.64 (0.67)
There is enough background information about advertising for teachers.	12	3.75 (0.96)
I have sufficient knowledge to teach about advertising.	13	3.76 (0.83)
The teacher's manual is clear.	12	3.83 (0.83)
To enhance minors' advertising literacy, I prefer to rely on my own teaching material.	22	2.95 (1.00)
To enhance minors' advertising literacy, I prefer to rely on teaching material created by educational publishing companies.	21	2.19 (0.98)
It is a parental task to enhance their children's advertising literacy.	25	3.44 (0.65)
The educational package would be better if parents were involved.	12	2.33 (1.37)
The use of authentic advertisements is justified in education.	11	3.72 (0.47)
The educational package would be better if more authentic advertisements were used.	9	3.22 (0.83)
Instead of an educational package, organising a project day or week would be better.	11	2.46 (1.04)
The educational package would be better if the lesson requires less than one hour.	12	2.00 (0.74)
The educational package would be better if it was more based on scientific theories.	12	1.92 (1.00)

Note. Scored on a 5-point likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree)

Most of the survey results displayed in Table 1 are confirmed in the focus groups. A first example is the necessity of paying attention to minors' advertising literacy during the entire school career: *"Maybe you can make a learning line with an educational package for primary education, for the beginning of secondary education and so on"* (teacher in focus group 2). Secondly, a reference to (cross-curricular) curriculum standards in teaching material is seen as an important aspect in both the survey and the focus groups. One teacher (focus group 1) said *"Teachers are certainly waiting for ready-to-use teaching material, but it all depends on how the curriculum standards are interwoven. As it takes up a large part, we are very happy"*. Closely related, the opinion is shared that enhancing adolescents' advertising literacy cannot be the responsibility of one subject teacher in secondary education. Therefore, teachers prefer cross-curricular educational material. By implementing *"Advertising in new media"*, both subject-related (e.g. Dutch) and cross-curricular (e.g. media literacy) objectives can be reached (see Table 1). Although teachers believe in working interdisciplinary, focus groups participants also argue it is difficult to organize in schools. An alternative would be a cross-curricular (school) project of one day or week. Teachers, however, do not favour this idea, which is supported by the following statement:

*But I'm a little bit scared that a project of a week or two weeks will be organized. [...] Advertising can also belong to the theme 'Health'. But what you often see when it comes to the health aspect in schools, is the organization of a project. And then you notice that the week of the project, you see that something is changing, something moves among the students. The week after, it's been a little less, but you can still see something. After a month, it is completely lost.*

Thirdly, the possibility to adapt teaching material (e.g. adapting some exercises, adding more examples and changing the layout) is also emphasized in both focus groups: *"If it is digitally offered, offer it as a Word-file and not as a PDF, so teachers can make a selection"*. For the sake of time pressure, teachers often select some exercises of ready-to-use educational material and they therefore suggest adding a timetable in which the expected minutes per activity are displayed. According to teachers, ready-to-use material provides guidance (n



= 17,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) and would stimulate them to pay attention to the theme advertising ( $n = 17$ ,  $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 0.66$ ). Perhaps as a result, Table 1 depicts that opinions are divided on the use of fully self-created teaching material. Moreover, textbooks created by educational publishing companies may be less suitable for this topic. Furthermore, teachers were asked to which extent they agree with the use of authentic advertisements in schools because learning content and material must in principle be shielded from advertising (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2003). As illustrated in Table 1, teachers prefer using authentic advertisements and plead for the integration of more examples in teaching material. Given the subject (i.e. predominantly online advertising), in the focus groups, it is additionally suggested to digitalize teaching material about advertising. Because of this, it is possible to refer to concrete (commercial) websites and movies as well as to update the teaching material. The use of other online exercises (e.g. the use of QR-codes, several apps such as *Socrative*, games) are also put forward. Finally, *“Advertising in new media”* provides an evaluation exercise, namely a short list of possible evaluation questions that can be submitted to the students at the end of the lesson(s). A teacher in focus group 1 calls it *“a no strings attached evaluation”*. It is moreover emphasized that these evaluation questions only focus on knowledge instead of skills and attitudes towards advertising. Suggestions regarding the evaluation of minors’ advertising literacy are given during the focus groups, for example a pre- and post-testing, retesting a couple of months after the intervention and a quiz at the end of the lesson.

Despite the many similarities, there are also some inconsistencies between the results of the survey and the focus groups. First, the survey results indicated that the quality of *“Advertising in new media”* would not improve by involving parents whereas focus group attendees claim the opposite. They suggest, for example, a homework task in which parents and their children are working together on the theme advertising. Secondly, the survey reveals that teachers attach less importance to a theory driven program. In focus group 2, nevertheless, a participant said: *“I like the scientific evaluation. I think it is useful that it [“Advertising in new media”] is based on research and that you evaluate it”*.

RQ3: Do teachers experience a need for professionalization in the context of advertising literacy education?

Teachers argue that advertising literacy (education) is seldom discussed in pre- or in-service teacher training. Although most teachers have previously taught about advertising (76,74%) and argued to have sufficient background information to teach about this topic (see Table 1), 82,35% is interested in an extra training. Both focus groups assume that media literacy - of which advertising literacy is one aspect - needs to be an integral part of preservice teacher training, but opinions are divided regarding a refresher course. Another suggestion is given in both focus groups, which is explained in the following statement:

*I think if you want they [teachers] use this material, that it is important that there is a completed copy of the pupils’ workbook for some teachers. So they can just say: “we do it!”. And there is also another group of teachers who want something more, extra background information.*

#### **4. Discussion and conclusion**

Around the world, some educational packages about advertisements already exist. However, research on teachers’ perceptions of advertising literacy education is still lacking. We therefore selected one educational package, namely *“Advertising in new media”*, to discuss in detail with teachers by means of a survey and focus groups. In general, this study has identified that enhancing minors’ advertising literacy is an educational task according to teachers. Nevertheless, they argue that other actors (e.g. parents) should also take responsibility about this matter. Concerning the content of teaching material about advertisements, abilities as recognizing (new) advertising forms and dealing critically with commercial messages are seen as important. Teachers also underscore the significance of tackling both traditional and new advertising forms, the intent of advertising, persuasive tactics as well as values and norms used in advertisements. Regarding the advertising formats themselves, it has to be noted that elaborating on Facebook advertisements is preferable to other (new) advertising forms. Consistent with research of O’Donnell and Cramer (2015) who remark that social media users are not always aware of personalization and do often not understand how it works, some teachers in this study emphasize that adolescents have to gain insight into the origins of SNS advertising.

Next to context aspects, the second major finding of this study is that most of the design guidelines uncovered by both Nation et al (2003) and Meeus et al (2014) about, respectively, prevention education in general and advertising literacy education more particularly are confirmed by teachers. A first example is that teachers point to the necessity of paying attention to minors’ advertising literacy during the entire school career. This

finding is in line with the principles *appropriately timed* and *sufficiently dosed* of Nation and colleagues (2003). However, Meeus et al (2014) found that educational advertising programmes are especially aimed to children in primary education. As these authors suggested, teachers are also in favor of teaching material created for both primary and secondary education. A second example is related to teachers' professionalization. One of the nine principles uncovered by Nation et al (2003) is *well-trained staff*. Meeus et al (2014) also refer to the provision of didactic support for teachers. Not unexpectedly, teachers in this study state that advertising literacy is barely discussed in pre- and in-service training. Although most of those surveyed are interested in an additional training about this matter, the focus groups reveal that not all teachers support the idea of a refresher course. Nevertheless, focus groups participants emphasize the importance of integrating the theme media literacy - of which advertising literacy is just one part - in preservice teacher training.

Although the survey was sent to 247 persons, a limitation of this study is that only 28 teachers completed the survey. Despite the small number of respondents, this study - partly due to the focus groups - reveal secondary education teachers' perceptions of advertising literacy education. Their experiences and suggestions are invaluable regarding the adaptation or development of (existing) educational material. Moreover, this study is part of a PhD project of which the final aim is having empirical educational packages - for both primary and secondary education - that enhance minors' advertising literacy (cf. design-based research). Future research should, however, focuses on the empirical evaluation of educational programmes.

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## Appendix: Semi-structured interview used during the focus groups

Semi-structured interview used during the focus groups	
	Questions
Introduction questions	<p>"Introduce yourself based on the general question you individually filled in"</p> <p>React on the statement: "It is an educational task to enhance minors' advertising literacy".</p>
"Advertising in new media"	<p>Beforehand: Teachers were given time to browse this educational package.</p> <p>"Sum up pros and cons of this educational package" (written down on green and orange cards). Some additional questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What do you think about the unilateral emphasis on online advertising formats?</li> <li>- The educational package is aimed to grade 7 and 8 of K12 education, but it is necessary to pay attention to minors' advertising literacy during the entire school career.</li> <li>- How can we involve parents advertising literacy education?</li> <li>- How can we evaluate whether minors' advertising literacy is enhanced after the intervention?</li> <li>- ...</li> </ul> <p>"If you have some suggestions in the context of improving advertising literacy education, then we want to hear them" (written down on blue cards).</p>
Professional development	"Which tips do you have regarding teachers' professionalization in the context of advertising literacy education?"
Final question	"If you have comments, questions or advice for us, then we want to hear them".